DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 241 939 CS 208 200

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TITLE Evaluating on the Right Side.
PUB DATE Nov 83
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (73rd, Denver, CO, November 18-23, 1983).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cerebral Dominance; Evaluation Criteria; *Evaluation Methods; Feedback; Holistic Evaluation; Peer Evaluation; Reader Response; Revision (Written Composition); Student Teacher Relationship; Teacher Role; Teaching Methods; *Writing Evaluation; Writing Improvement; Writing Instruction; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS *Affective Domain

ABSTRACT

Using the right hemisphere of the brain in evaluating student writing means consciously and consistently incorporating its emotional, intuitive, and holistic functions with the more analytical functions of the logical "left" hemisphere when considering, judging, and directing improvement in student writing. Research seems to suggest that teachers who consistently use "right side" evaluation methods can influence students toward developing their own trust and skill in making more extensive use of their "right side." Students use the right brain to comprehend better the full meaning of teachers' oral and written evaluations of their writing, and for their own continued writing improvement. Adaptable for use in a variety of contexts are eight "right brain" methods for evaluating student writing: (1) comment on one or two positive points, (2) convey honest feelings about a paper, (3) talk with the student about overall impressions of the paper, (4) establish open-ended/criterion referenced evaluation, (5) use peer partner evaluation, (6) use imagery or analogy to help students initiate corrections, (7) work with the class at semantic evaluation, and (8) use language history in providing feedback to students. (HTH)

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EVALUATING ON THE RIGHT SIDE

by William R. Martin

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"All these spelling errors really make me angry!"

"Aha! I think now I get a picture of what Warren is trying to say with his comparison."

"I've got a good overall 'feel' for Kim's paper."

As the three quotes suggest, teachers clearly do not abandon their emotions, their intuition, their sense for a piece as a whole when evaluating student written work. But they might not attend to these right brain approaches with deliberate intent, or very often, or effectively enough to help students become increasingly engaged with writing. Yet, it is the right hemisphere of our cerebral cortex which, according to findings of neurologists studying the brain, "seems to play a special role in emotion" (Levy, 1983, p. 68). Besides being a "seat" for "state of mind," emotions and feelings--the so-called "affective domain"--the right hemisphere makes major contributions to leaps of insight; seeing likenesses between things and understanding metaphoric relationships; and perceiving overall patterns. In short, according to Lundy's review of research on cerebral hemisphere specialization (1981, p. 13), "the right cerebral hemisphere processes information non-linearly and wholistically, simultaneously dealing with different kinds of information. It seems to be specialized primarily for nonverbal, concrete, spatial, analogical, emotional, and esthetic functions."

By definition, using the right hemisphere in evaluating student writing, or "evaluating on the right side," means incorporating consciously and consistently the emotional, intuitive, and holistic functions of the right hemisphere of the brain into considering, judging, and directing improvement in student writing. It means including "right brain" functions along with the more analytical functions of the "logical left" hemisphere in a synergistic, combined actin, "whole brain" approach to evaluation. (In fact, both "brains" must be engaged for effective evaluation of student writing. Recent research, for example, is showing evidence that right-left brain functions exist in both hemispheres of the brain and are not necessarily limited to one hemisphere or the other.) Evaluating on the right side also means employing the following teacher behaviors:

- Providing nonverbal feedback (like "happy faces") as well as verbal to help students recognize and feel good about their strengths in writing at the same time they are learning something about their needs and about their own right hemisphere skills and capacities.
- Responding with consideration for the different learning styles of the student writers (field-independent or field dependent, for instance--or the extent to which they are able to overcome effects of distracting background elements, the field, when they attempt to differentiate the relevant aspects to them of the teacher's evaluation. The less capable individuals are of freeing

themselves from the distracting elements, like their attitude toward the teacher, the more field dependent they are. Field-dependent students may well perceive the teacher's evaluation as a whole: "My paper is bad." They may have difficulty separating out specific feedback items from the overall information given: "Your ideas I like, but you misspelled seven words.")

- Reporting on the overall impression and whole idea of the writing, not only on grammar, usage, mechanics, and other specific concerns in the writing.
- Asking various types and levels of questions in the evaluation to stimulate students' creative as well as rational engagement with their own writing.
- Providing personal affective data (feelings and emotions) that is informative, genuine and honest, and controlled rather than something offered just to be "nice." (Recall the oft quoted, "Picasso, this is a very good painting. Keep up the good work!")
- Encouraging student writers through the evaluation to try additional opportunities to practice their writing: "You might enjoy doing a paragraph on the idea in your paper which I underlined. It seems to me that it interests you and that you might want to work more on it. I'd be glad to read the results with 'no risk' to you." Feedback of this nature may help students gain confidence in their work, learn to trust themselves and their ideas, take

responsibility for their writing, and free themselves to take risks.

But even when aware of the need for using the right brain to bring about an integrative relationship with left-brain thinking for effective evaluation of student writing, teachers do relatively little to bring their two "minds" into better alignment. Results reported from English Journal readership survey (Gillis 1977) to assess the materials and activities teachers use in their classrooms, in its section on "Evaluation," made no mention of any special right brain procedures used by teachers. And my own search through recent English Journals, perhaps the major magazine in influencing what goes on with writing in secondary schools at least, revealed just two articles attending specifically to what could be considered right hemisphere functions in evaluating. The first, "Non-Judgmental Responses to Students' Writing" (Johnston 1982) advocates teacher use of "I Messages" and "emphatic responses." The former is reviewed, in more detail, in Teacher Effectiveness Training (Gordon 1974) and is illustrated in "I feel happy when I read your paragraph because it makes use of the style we talked about in class." "Emphatic responses," presented in depth in Peter Elbow's book, Writing Without Teachers (1973), call for the teacher to respond as from within the piece of writing, perhaps nonverbally by drawing a blue teardrop on the paper to convey an unhappy feeling about how the paper is presented.

The second article, "Voices Within: The Audience Speaks" (MacLean 1983), suggests teachers ask students to write down what they think of <u>their</u> drafted paper as they reread it and to write those thoughts near where they start thinking them--even if in the margins. Students should be invited to evaluate their own writing, how they feel about it as a whole, for example. Students who are not comfortable in revealing feelings or doubts they have about their writing may voice their discomfort. Through this procedure of encouraging students to make judgments on their own work, the teacher is engaging the student's inner voice (along with, likely, his/her right brain) in the role of "audience" throughout the writing experience.

The current experimenting with holistic scoring (White 1982), of course, is also generally "right brain" in nature. It relies on the ability of the right hemisphere of the brain to consider a large mass of written data and simultaneously make a judgment about the adequacy and effectiveness of the whole piece of writing. Overall, however, Gabriele Lusser Rico's observation in her provoking new book, <u>Writing the Natural Way</u> (1983, p. 9) seems quite accurate: ". . . missing from the traditional teaching of writing (in which she includes evaluation) (is) a deliberate right hemisphere involvement in this complex symbolic activity."

What we continue to learn about our brain gives hints that teachers <u>should</u> attend to the "right side" in evaluating student writing. For example, this hemisphere seems to react to sensory

information (the student's paper) in a more primitive and direct way than the left hemisphere, therefore, permitting the resultant affective states (feelings, emotions) within the teacher to retain their immediateness and power. The trick is to translate (through left brain conversions) the emotional response into language students can receive and use, that is, "evaluating on the right side." A feeling of "YUCK!" at the student's paper can be transmitted, for instance, as: "I feel really puzzled by the number of sentences I see in your writing which are simply unclear to me. Your previous two papers were 'OK' according to my records. I need to know which of your writings accurately reflects where you are in terms of your ability to write." Not only might such a "right side" oriented method bring stimulation to the student for revision, but it might also provide a positive and professional outlet for teacher frustration with student writing.

In addition, research seems to suggest that teachers who consistently use "right side" evaluation methods can, in some small ways at least, influence students toward developing their own trust and skill in making more extensive use of <u>their</u> "right side." As Galyean pointed out from her review of pertinent research on brain hemispheric functioning (1981, p. 8), "right hemispheric functions can be . . . stimulated, evoked and clarified through the frequent use of . . . affective activities that seem to open up the right cortical area . . . ." And students do use their right brain in writing! Glassner (1980),

for example, looked at the process of composition with older students to determine which hemisphere was engaged during two modes of writing--one focusing on the ability of the writer to convey a message, and the other focusing on the writer's ability to express his or her thoughts and feelings about a closely felt personal experience. He noted that while the writing product is in a linear form, its processes incorporate nonlinear, nonverbal, "right brain" forms of thought.

A working cycle to consider, then, is: Teacher has right brain. Teacher uses right brain. Teacher encourages right brain (with students). Students use their right brain to better comprehend the full meaning from the teacher's oral or written evaluation of their writing, and for their own continued improvement. Rico (1983, p. 22) identifies six writing behaviors, with "right brain" connections, in which students can improve: wholeness--which includes the ability to select certain words to convey a desired overall impression as in "Winter: slippy, drippy, nippy;" language rhythms--or being able to make use of the natural "poetry" of words, like "sushi" or "symbiosis;" recurrence--using ideas and/or stylistic devices to provide a picture or image for the reader or to appeal to the reader's emotions. An example is the conclusion to Dr. Martin Luther King's 1963 speech: "Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last." Students can also become more able in using: image power--like "that's a bum idea;" metaphoric connection--as in a response to "How do I define

clouds?" being "Clouds are like puffs of cotton" rather than "Clouds are formations of condensed water;" and creative tension--such as is in quality poetry like Carl Sandburg's "Chicago" and Bob Dylan's Blowin' In The Wind."

Combine all of this, and it seems that evaluating on the right side is well worth a try. It releases some of the feelings teachers have--and may make them feel better in the process; it is at least a reasonable approach in the light of available research; and it could prove productive in increasing right brain behaviors in students. What is needed by teachers interested in trying evaluation "on the right side" is a number of workable and worthwhile methods upon which they can draw to do the job and which will add to their repetoire of what may well be now mostly predominately "left-brain" oriented evaluation strategies. Here are eight that can be adapted for use in a variety of contexts in which teachers work with students with respect to evaluating their written composition.

1. "Engaging Strokes" - In "Strokes," you find one or two things done effectively in the student writing--and maybe nothing else at this time. There can always be at least one asset to any piece of student writing. Comment on what you find, using "right brain" humor or emotional overtones yourself to stimulate the engagement process.

Example

"Sally, your short story gives me a useful physical description of your main character, but I haven't the

foggiest idea whether to be surprised, grieved, scared, or aroused by her. For instance, is the '38' you mention her bust size or her IQ?"

Note: Write comments in pencil rather than ink which "deface" student property and curtails the opportunity to make changes. Also, when students see you are doing various things to help them, they are more likely to become engaged with you, and with writing.

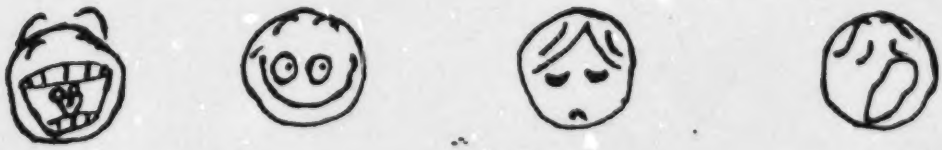
2. "See/Feel" Responses - Take a risk and state your honest feelings about the piece of student writing. Your professional openness may enable the student to try again and, perhaps, try more adventurous writing as well.

Example

"When I see you start so many sentences with 'the,' I get (feel) bored. Maybe you could try parallel structure, starting with '-ing' words. Then at least I would feel more alert and interested when reading your paper."

or

Simply draw, or stamp, faces on the student's paper expressing your feelings about the writing or different parts of the writing at this stage.



Hysterical Interested Disapppointed Bored

or

Attach to the paper where appropriate some of the many kinds of commercially available stickers, such as the "scratch and sniff" reward stick-ons.

3. "Person-to-Person"

Talk with the student (maybe at his/her desk or a mutually convenient place--not necessarily your desk) about your overall impression of the student's paper: what the ideas expressed mean to you and how you value them, and howt the way they are expressed affects you--makes you feel, for instance. This is an interaction between two concerned people in preference to an intervention from a teacher to a student. Its primary purpose is not to discuss a letter grade or a "mistake" but to facilitate understanding, further discussion, and subsequent growth on what the student writer is trying to say.

Example

"Now that I've read over your paper, let's talk for a few minutes--either now or when we can get together. I'll tell you what I think you are saying overall and how I react to it ('holistically'). You tell me if I am 'reading you' accurately. If I am, I'd like to share some of my more specific thoughts and feelings and reactions with you. If I'm not, perhaps we can work together through your writing and revision to get on the same wavelength."

Note: A less personal but time-saving version for serving more students and still maintaining a dialogue is to put comments on audio-tape or computer when the paper is first read by the teacher and then invite students to "connect in" and even respond through similar use of technology.

4. "Open-Ended/Criterion Referenced Evaluation"

Establish with the class a workable set of criteria for evaluating effective writing. Include the affective dimension in the criteria. For example, "This piece of writing has words that are 'flavorful' for me" and "This piece of writing draws me into it."

Hold students to these criteria as appropriate for the particular assignment. But provide them with the option of continuing to revise and upgrade their work based on your--and students'--feedback until at least the minimum criteria for the assignment have been met. (These criteria may be connected to a letter grade.) Cooperative planning of the evaluative criteria and rebuttal of the thinking that turning in a paper the first time represents "the end" works positively on student attitude and their sense of problem solving for developing personal responsibility for their writing.

Example

(+6)

1. "You have met all 6 criteria agreed upon for this assignment (and therefore have earned an 'A'). Good job!"

(+4 (of 6))

2. "OK so far (a 'B'); show me evidence of criteria #1 and #3 for full credit."

5. "Peer Partners"

Set up "helping trios" to interact on a student's completed paper or early draft. Two students interact on one person's paper which is read aloud by the writer. The third member of the trio stays out of the interaction and serves as an observer to provide resources such as the teacher or a dictionary--and to keep the two on task. A previously developed and discussed and distributed cognitive/affective evaluation guide is used to direct the interaction and as a reference for the observer.

The teacher circulates around the room modeling active listening and serving as a resource. The result can build trust and respect for the opinions and values of others, an atmosphere in which subsequent writing and evaluation can flourish. Also, if done with drafts, this method can allow students to assess and improve their own work before it gets to the more formal audience of teacher.

Example

"Using the evaluation guide we developed in class, please move into the helping trios we have been practicing. Pick classmates with whom you would like to work this time. Take this opportunity to evaluate your writing. Then make your improvements and turn in your paper to me."

6. "Imagery-Analogy"

Pick reasonably competent students who are evidencing unacceptable writing behaviors, the correction of which lie mostly within their control (e.g., "carelessness," not "dyslexia"). Allow creative focusing from the inside (imagery) or from the outside (analogy) to help them at least initiate their own corrections. These two methods which may overlap, call for creative thinking (right brain activity) on the part of the teacher as well as the student since either one can get them underway.

Example

"I want you to shut your eyes and picture the word 'theif' which you misspelled in your writing. Does another way of spelling it look right to you? Write it down and check it out in a dictionary."

(Imagery)

"Your paragraph reminds me of a carnival shooting gallery with a 'hit or miss' approach to correct spelling. You

seem to be just 'firing' and hoping. You clearing missed on 'theif.' Try again with more concentration and by checking in a dictionary before commiting yourself."

(Analogy)

Note: Feedback of a word picture and related creative comment placed on the student's paper also serves "the right side:" "Jack, re 'th--f' on your paper; I have 'taken' your incorrect spelling of this word. Please replace it with the correct one."

7. "Semantic Evaluating"

Work with the class as a whole (or with individuals if time permits) to measure the connotations of a writer's words. Once a volunteer is available, select words from that person's paper which are similar in meaning. Put them on the board, or a ditto, and ask the class to raise their hands when the rating they independently assign for their connotation of each word is called by the recorder.

Results can alert the class, and especially the volunteer writer, to the perhaps unintentional emotional loading of his/her paper as well as to the values and purpose of knowing and using synonyms in writing.

Example
"How I Feel About . . ."

Word	Very Good 1	Fairly Good 2	Neutral 3	Fairly Bad 4	Very Bad 5	← Ratings Comment
lady		𝍸				
female	𝍸					
broad		//	/	//		
fox			//	///		boys were '3' girls were '4'
woman	𝍸					
chick		///	/		/	words can hurt
mom	////	/				

8. "Word History"

A somewhat different approach for working with the "right side" in evaluating student writing also has to do with words, in this case, the history of words teachers use to provide feedback to student writers. Knowing something of the etymology of the words they are likely to use, and choosing accordingly, may enable teachers to increase students' positive feeling about their writing and bring about subsequent improvement, especially when the students are taught the same word histories.

Here are some examples:

1. "I like this sentence!"

   sentence - comes from "way of thinking;" "to be of an opinion." (In this example you are literally telling the student that the opinion s/he has expressed is of value to you.)

2. "Your writing here stays with me!"

   write - derives out of "to engrave or carve or scratch as in bark or wood." (In this example, you are telling the student that at least this part of his/her written work has figuratively engraved itself on your thinking.)

3. "You seem to be enthusiastic about your topic."

   enthusiasm - comes from a combination of words (Greek) meaning "possessed by a god;" an enthusiastic person was someone who was literally inspired by a powerful force. (In this example, you are encouraging the student to keep on writing by helping him or her recognize, if not harness and direct, his energy for this topic.)

   Note: Choice of words gives students clues as to how we think. How we think, and how we reveal how and what we think--through words--provides an important part of the emotional climate in which students do their writing and rewriting. And that climate, as Antoine De Saint-Exupery's "Little Prince" might say, "is a matter of so much importance!"

Before selecting any of the methods for evaluating on the "right side," teachers should be sure to be satisfied with the answers to the following questions:

1. Is the method likely to do what needs being done?
   After all, these take time and only so much of the teaching day is available for evaluating student writing. The methods on which you chose to use your time and energy need to have a reasonable likelihood of helping students improve their writing. A good way to check out whether improvement is taking place is to try out the method selected on a few students at a time while using conventional evaluation methods on the others.
2. How close a fit is there between the method selected and the students involved?
   Let us say, for example, that you have a student whose learning style is quite literal. Drawing him or her word pictures or asking her to "imagine" simply might not work. Responding with "I Messages," or the like, might be an added frustration to the low ability student who has as much trouble reading your words as writing his. That is not to say that you shouldn't help students grow from whatever ability level or learning style they currently possess to a capability within their limits to learn in a variety of ways. It does mean that you need to find out where they "are" and start there.
3. Is the feedback you are giving persuasive to students?
   Do students respond to the affective methods of feedback and make changes and improve in their writing? Keep some baseline records and find out for yourself.

4. Can you anticipate any problems that might arise from the use of the method(s) you select?

   Parents and students may need to be forewarned that you will be doing some planned affective evaluation of written work--and why. Try to see the effect through the eyes of the parents and students before employing affective evaluation methods, especially if such are new to your system.

5. Do you have the wherewithal to use the affective evaluation methods effectively?

   You may need tape recorders and ditto masters, for instance. Overall, think through the methods in advance, while using them, and after using them. Practice with them and you will be able to use them to everyone's advantage. You can also develop more methods of your own as you get more into the habit of evaluating on the right side!

In sum, when teachers are both interested in and capable of engaging their own "right side" and that of their students, when teachers are comfortable in dealing with their feelings about what is written and the way it is written as well as with the facts, and when affectively oriented methods such as those described are incorporated in some fair fashion into the evaluation process, then, and only then, will the much heralded "teaching writing" movement be complete.

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